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# A FOOT FORWARD, OR FOOT IN MOUTH?



*Problematising Lothar Baumgarten's Permanent Installation in The Hall of Sculpture at the Carnegie Museum of Art*

By Krystina Mierins

In March 2015, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania announced that Ingrid Schaffner will curate the next Carnegie International (CI), the second oldest survey of contemporary art in the world after the Venice Biennial. Over the next three years, Schaffner will attempt the Herculean task of assessing and distilling contemporary art from around the globe in order to create a cohesive curatorial statement for the show opening in Fall 2018. Most of this project will be framed by the grand architectural spaces of the museum. Of particular interest is the Hall of Sculpture, a room that has proven to be highly appealing to artists and curators, but is riddled with challenges that often go overlooked.

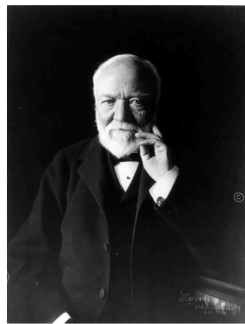




The Hall of Sculpture at The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Photo: Frank Kovalchek. Creative Commons.

The Hall of Sculpture, modeled on the interior of the Parthenon, provides an unusual context for viewing art in the Carnegie Museum of Art. The room, which was opened to the public in 1907, initially housed a collection of sculptural plaster casts. While some of these are still on display, the space is now often the setting for performances or sculptural installations. The classically inspired room is a small part of 19th-century steel magnate Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic project to provide the people of Pittsburgh with access to art and culture from around the world. He took a paternalistic approach to this role and, as a result, his institution, like so many others, presented perspectives promoted by colonial powers.

Today, this viewpoint is perpetuated by the ongoing presence of German artist Lothar Baumgarten's *The Tongue of the Cherokee* (1985-1988) installed in the Hall of Sculpture for the 1988 Carnegie International (CI88). The neo-colonial ideology inherent to this work representing a facet of Cherokee culture from the perspective of a European artist has gone unacknowledged by the art museum. Schaffner will have the means to respond to the challenges this work provides in the Hall of Sculpture, but will she do so?



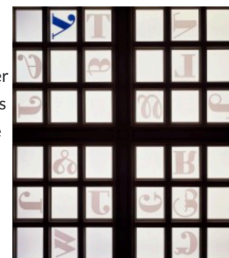
Andrew Carnegie (1913), Photo: Theodore C. Marceau. Courtesy of The Library of Congress.

Robber baron Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) made his fortune in the steel industry during the latter half of the nineteenth century and used his resources for philanthropic work. He is best known for funding more than 1600 libraries in the English-speaking world, but he supported many other beneficent works, including the Carnegie Museum. The museum, which initially focused on art and natural history, was first opened in 1895. The functions of the complex, which also included a large library and a concert hall, soon outgrew the building and a major expansion was required within a few years. The addition nearly tripled the size of the original building and included the Hall of Sculpture, which was built to display 69 plaster casts of sculptures from antiquity. The room was constructed with marble from the same quarries

in Greece as those used for the temple on the Acropolis. The ceiling is a grid of skylights and immediately below this is a cast of the frieze showing the first festival of Athena that is found on the exterior of the Parthenon's cella. To build the institution's collection, Carnegie thought it was imperative to move beyond replicas of masterpieces of the past and to collect artworks by the "Masters of Tomorrow." This was his philosophy behind establishing the Carnegie International. The museum's collection has been built on this exhibition from which it continues to acquire works.

For CI88, German artist Lothar Baumgarten's *The Tongue of the Cherokee* (1985-1988) was inscribed in the skylight panels, featuring the eighty-five characters of the Cherokee alphabet. The indigenous culture, with its oral tradition, was impacted when these syllabic symbols were developed by Sequoyah, a member of the Cherokee Nation, between 1809 and 1821. He believed that his culture could continue to thrive if it could be documented in writing, the method of record trusted by the colonial powers. When Baumgarten chose to install Sequoyah's characters framed by the classical architecture, it seems that he demonstrated a paternalistic colonial attitude as the architecture is positioned as a form of validation.

This perspective persists at the Carnegie Museum of Art through the architecture, which is unchanging, but is also reflected by the institution itself. More than 25 years after Baumgarten's work was acquired, the Carnegie Museum's website says this work "reflects on an outstanding Native American achievement—the invention of a Cherokee alphabet by Sequoyah."<sup>[1]</sup> The authoritative curatorial voice of the text ends in the following way:



Lothar Baumgarten, *The Tongue of the Cherokee*, 1985-1988. Copyright Carnegie Museum of

By situating Native American language within the context of an architectural monument derived from Western culture, Baumgarten sought an end to the exclusion of one

culture by another and to spurious claims of cultural superiority. This dialectic work honors Sequoyah's place in American history, in the spirit of considering all people as part of a single society. [2]

Art, Pittsburgh.

Together Baumgarten and the museum seem aligned in suggesting that the shift from an oral to written tradition, an emulation of the colonial cultures, was an achievement. This reinforces the hierarchy that is imperative to the ongoing success of neo-colonization. This view was also expressed by critics at the time of CI88. John Russell wrote, "The Pittsburgh piece is about one of the great 19th-century achievements—the gift to a small and harassed people of a mode of communication that will help them to reinforce their identity." [3] But post-colonial theorist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o points out,

Language carries culture, and culture carries ... the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. [4]

Sequoyah's alphabet, while an interesting accomplishment in itself, permanently altered the function of the Cherokee language.

Furthermore, one can argue, following art critic Jean Fisher, that for the colonized, "the source of pain and injustice [that] is the dispossession of the mother tongue and possession by a *foreign* language" could also be considered, in the Cherokee's case, the muting of a fluid oral tradition for the static written form—a foreign method of communication, "from which the self has the task of constituting new subjectivity and agency." [5] Inherent to an oral tradition is the necessity to speak and to tell stories repeatedly as a community activity. Although this cultural practice continues, its role shifted with the introduction of the written record.

Critics discussed Baumgarten's life experiences to serve as a misguided validation of *The Tongue of the Cherokee*. The artist had lived with the Yanomami, native people in the Amazon rainforests, from 1978-1980. He and others attempted to use this to legitimize his subject position for future art projects; Baumgarten believed that his experience in Venezuela qualified him to speak on behalf of indigenous cultures from across the Americas. The artist stated, "You cannot reflect your own society unless you know a society that is remote from it. To know that society, you don't want to walk into it, get a Ph.D. and turn the page. You have to jump into the bushes, almost naked, as I did." [6] While he argued that it was only through his experience that he was able to truly understand his own European context, he did not create work about German culture or language or even employ his subject position in dialog with various indigenous cultures, but rather presented his viewpoint as objective.

Baumgarten acted as an observer and attempted to convey cultural information to museum audiences. Fisher writes, "to witness is also to 'mediate', and one can appreciate [an] objection to certain forms of mediation ... these risk empowering the already powerful through a voyeuristic and vicarious identification." Baumgarten has selected and has presented indigenous cultures through a lens informed by colonial ideology, but his ideas are presented as absolute truths.

Furthermore, Baumgarten has often been written about as one who documents "disappearing" indigenous cultures, [7] which implies that these cultures are static, and unlike Western cultures do not adapt and change. In fact, Russell's review of Baumgarten's contribution to CI88, stated:

Baumgarten also reminds us that many of those peoples have been wiped out, utterly and without remorse, as a result of the white man's greed for possession. Not only human beings but the landscape that they once inhabited may vanish from the earth. We all know that, in a vague uncaring way, but Baumgarten has the right to tell us about it. [8]

This statement reflects the Western desire to romanticize the other as fixed in history. It does not recognize that many indigenous traditions have changed over time, just as Western cultures have, and that they can continue to thrive. While this perspective is now recognized as problematic, critiques like Russell's demonstrate the lack of awareness regarding how these writings, and even Baumgarten's artwork, acted to reinforce colonial structures in the United States in the late 1980s. Both his text and Baumgarten's piece may have been created with good intentions, but should now be

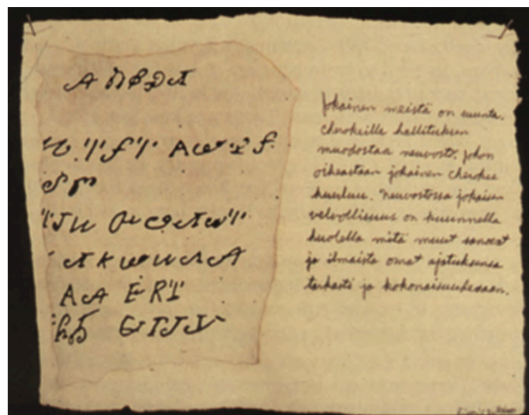
problematicized.

While several critics championed Baumgarten's recognition of Sequoyia's accomplishment, Jean Fisher later observed:

EACH LETTER OF THE CHEROKEE SYLLABARY ... WAS ISOLATED AND TRAPPED IN THE STRUCTURAL GRID OF THE CEILING. THUS FROZEN LIKE PREHISTORIC FLIES IN AMBER AND DIVORCED FROM THEIR POTENTIAL AS WRITING (I.E., THEIR ORGANISATION INTO A THOUGHT), THE LETTERS (LIKE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES WITHIN THE FANTASMATIC IMAGINATION OF WHITE AMERICA) WERE REMOVED TO A NON-HISTORICAL PAST AND AN INACCESSIBLE, QUASI-TRANSCENDENTAL SPACE. [9]

The architecture framed and contained—and in a sense controlled—the representation of the Cherokee language, which in this case can be understood as a synecdoche for the indigenous group. Furthermore, it was presented in an institution that has the function of preserving history, and here represents Sequoyah's syllabics alongside treasures of the past.

In response to Baumgarten's work, artist Jimmie Durham created *Not Lothar Baumgarten's Cherokee* (1990). The small-scale work contrasts two photocopied fragments of text that resemble archival documents. One is a handwritten transcription of text in Finnish that refers to the Cherokee and the other shows a few lines in Sequoyah's syllabics. Unlike the useless characters in the skylight panels, Durham shows the language as functional albeit indecipherable for the majority of viewers.



Jimmie Durham, *Not Lothar Baumgarten's Cherokee*, 1990. See "[Jimmie Durham's multi-faceted practice](#)" by Annie Koh.

Durham, himself a descendant of the Cherokee, has observed "that narratives of 'Indian sorrows,'" although at the Carnegie Museum of Art presented as 'Indian accomplishments,' "are no more than 'entertainment' for White America. Durham believes his work is necessary in establishing and narrating the ongoing socio-political realities of Native America's traumatic histories against a distorting romanticism." [10] Unfortunately, his perspective is not recognized in the Hall of Sculpture as the museum offers no information there about Durham's piece. More than 25 years after it was first installed, Baumgarten's work is still presented as an authoritative view on the superiority of the written word.

Ultimately, *The Tongue of the Cherokee* functions similarly to a monument or memorial celebrating the colonial influence, particularly as it has an ongoing presence. The work endorses one view of history and can be understood with Benedict Anderson's concept of "collective amnesia," which suggests that people form imagined communities because they perceive a shared identity based on select, privileged characteristics that are documented in the "official" record of history. [11] Baumgarten's piece reinforces a constructed national narrative that endorses the "progress" of the colonial project, while omitting and thus forgetting, other perspectives. The piece cements one viewpoint while discounting the idea that the disruption to the Cherokee system of communication may have had detrimental effects. It validates the colonizer and discounts the colonized. Baumgarten's work has 'overseen' every Carnegie International since 1988.

Another problematic artist installation in the Hall of Sculpture sheds further light on Baumgarten's continuing legacy. At the following iteration of the survey in 1991, Allan McCollum's installation *Lost Objects* was displayed below the grid of Cherokee syllabics on the ground level of the Hall of Sculpture. This work featured casts created from dinosaur bone fossils in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History's collection. McCollum had not sought to show his work in the Hall of Sculpture:

I liked the room mainly because it was big and it was very grand and maybe it would lend a little drama to the piece.... More significantly, if you walked through the door in back you walked right into the Natural History Museum. It was the only part of the art museum that connected to it. I didn't mind the classical sculpture surrounding the room, but I didn't mean to make too big of a drama between nature and culture. It was as much happenstance as anything else.<sup>[12]</sup>

But the link between dinosaur bones and the copies of the Parthenon and sculptures of antiquities could not be ignored. A space dedicated to copies might seem fitting for McCollum, who had had a long-term interest in casts. These had primarily taken the forms of contemporary man-made objects, but for CI91 he looked to nature and the past. The use of the museum specimens gave McCollum the impression that he had dealt with his concern about the legitimacy of the objects: "since the fossil was already a duplicate there wouldn't be any loss of authenticity by reduplicating it."<sup>[13]</sup>



Allan McCollum, *Lost Objects*, 1991. Installation view. Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

In this location, McCollum's statement becomes a questionable sentiment as the plaster casts were displayed close to actual fossils and bones in the nearby Natural History Museum and were shown alongside duplicates of the Parthenon and antiquities. It is difficult to see them as having a closer relationship to nature's copies than to the surrounding casts.

This is underscored if we consider that natural history museums routinely make casts of fossils for both scientific study and didactic purposes. Here, the maker and institutional framework both influence how we understand these objects.

In the endnotes of Fisher's critique of the Baumgarten, she points out that the reading of the Cherokee syllabics as ineffective tools of language that had been captured in the space of another time was emphasized by the installation of dinosaur bones. McCollum unintentionally extends Fisher's observation by identifying the bones as reminders of death.<sup>[14]</sup> Furthermore, in an interview with Thomas Lawson, McCollum said, "copies are always about something that's absent, and ... they carry a sense of mourning, death, or loss."<sup>[15]</sup> McCollum goes on to state, "It seems to me that if we didn't have artifacts to remind us about the past everything would disappear."<sup>[16]</sup> This thinking motivated his project to re-present fossils, but in the context of the Hall of Sculpture, this sentiment reiterates the idea that the Cherokee are a vanishing race that belong with artifacts like the dinosaur bones and antiquities.

Several years after McCollum's installation, Kara Walker's *Emancipation Approximation* danced across the walls of the balcony of the Hall of Sculpture for the CI99/00. For the exhibition, Walker applied black and white silhouettes to the walls of the balcony level of the Hall of Sculpture. White figures were not just suggested by form—as in earlier work—but paraded across the walls alongside starkly black figures. The plaster cast reproductions of classical sculptures installed on plinths on the balustrade became implicit in Walker's narrative. Her composition behind the Doric pilasters was not broken into distinct moments framed by the architecture. Rather, the dynamic figures interacted in the architectural space, creating a confrontation between the pure classical tradition and the violent abuses of colonization.





Kara Walker, *Emancipation Approximation*, 1999-2000. Courtesy The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.

Installation photographs show Walker's vital life-size figures dominating the impressive balcony, transforming the viewer's experience of the space. The artist accomplished this dramatic effect by continuing her use of the silhouette, a medium often deemed to be a lower art form. She describes how the medium functions for the viewer: "The silhouette is a blank space that you [can] project your desires into. It can be positive or negative." [17] By employing her caricature-like approach in a direct way in the Hall of Sculpture, the clash between Classicism and a history of sexism, racism and violence that has roots in slavery intensified Walker's work in a way that could not be achieved in the ubiquitous white cube, the usual context for the silhouette pieces.



Kara Walker, *Marvelous Sugar Baby*, 2014. *Sugar Baby* (2014) was shown at the slated-for-demolition Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn. The sugar coated sculpture depicted the form of a sphinx with the head of a racist Mammy stereotype and exaggerated sex characteristics. The work, a critique of slavery and representations of black women, was mocked by many visitors and disrespectful selfies that minimized Walker's message soon populated the #KaraWalkerDomino Instagram account. The artist predicted that some viewers would respond this way and had a film crew secretly record the visitors documenting their experience to create the film *An Audience* (2014). By offering uncomfortable stereotypes, which are immediately recognizable to viewers, Walker confronts her audience with the gruesome history of slavery and the legacy of systemic racism that is often too easily glossed over. Her work, according to Ferguson, "opposes [a] poetics of evasion with an aesthetics of engagement and confrontation and looks bold-faced at those elements to which African American history has turned its back." [19] Hilton Als has described Walker's work as "diaristic in tone, but the diary Walker keeps is not explicitly personal; it's a historical ledger filled with one-line descriptions about all those bodies and psyches that were bought and sold from the seventeenth century on.... Walker knows the ghosts can hurt you because history does not go away." [20]

Roderick Ferguson, professor of African American, Gender and Women's Studies at University of Chicago, specified, "Walker is interested, generally in the layered figuration called 'black woman' and particularly, in the ways in which that figuration receives an array of racialized, gendered, and sexualized projections." [18] More recently, Walker's controversial sculptural work *Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) was shown at the slated-for-demolition Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn. The sugar coated sculpture depicted the form of a sphinx with the head of a racist Mammy stereotype and exaggerated sex characteristics. The work, a critique of slavery and representations of black women, was mocked by many visitors and disrespectful selfies that minimized Walker's message soon populated the #KaraWalkerDomino Instagram account. The artist predicted that some viewers would respond this way and had a film crew secretly record the visitors documenting their experience to create the film *An Audience* (2014). By offering uncomfortable stereotypes, which are immediately recognizable to viewers, Walker confronts her audience with the gruesome history of slavery and the legacy of systemic racism that is often too easily glossed over. Her work, according to Ferguson, "opposes [a] poetics of evasion with an aesthetics of engagement and confrontation and looks bold-faced at those elements to which African American history has turned its back." [19] Hilton Als has described Walker's work as "diaristic in tone, but the diary Walker keeps is not explicitly personal; it's a historical ledger filled with one-line descriptions about all those bodies and psyches that were bought and sold from the seventeenth century on.... Walker knows the ghosts can hurt you because history does not go away." [20]

In the Carnegie International catalog for the 1999-2000 exhibition year, curator Madeleine Grynsztejn suggests the artist not only documents but also takes agency through this work: "Walker retells and takes fierce possession of a long and painful history of derogatory representation." [21] She documents the injustice of the past in a way that is visceral and relevant to the contemporary viewer. When looking at her work, one cannot escape the effect of the past. We are not presented with history in a dry text or documentary that can easily be set aside; we view human suffering implicit in the colonial project. Today, we can see installation images of *Emancipation Approximation*, but for the average visitor to the museum, there is no trace of Walker's contribution. The institution did acquire a portfolio of silkscreens depicting the imagery from the Hall of Sculpture installation, but these uncomfortable depictions are usually hidden in storage, only to emerge for brief periods for temporary exhibitions.



Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* portfolio from 1999-2000 as produced by Jenkins Sikkema Editions. See [Phillips.com auction house listing](http://Phillips.com/auctionhouse/listing) for further information about the series.

In "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," Adrian Piper wrote that the work of minority women "offers an alternative art-historical progression that narrates a history of prejudice, repression, and exclusion, and looks, not backward, but forward to a more optimistic future. It thereby competes with Euroethnic art history as a candidate for truth." [22] Walker offered an alternative truth in *Emancipation Approximation* and in 1999-2000, the museum was, and arguably still is, a context in which it was possible to present difficult discussions around the United States' challenging legacy that continues to perpetuate injustice. However, unfortunately, since the institution emerged from this same history, and in fact often functions to validate the system from a seemingly authoritative position as can be illustrated by Baumgarten's permanent installation, the museum perpetuates the inequality inherent in the colonial project. And so, after Walker's temporary installation, the Hall of Sculpture returned to the status quo of classical Western tradition.

More recently, the Bidoun Library, an art collective, confronted this challenge as part of the CI in 2013. This collective, which was formed in 2009, installs temporary libraries featuring an array of representations of Middle-Eastern culture. They describe this work as

A PRESENTATION OF PRINTED MATTER, CAREFULLY SELECTED WITH NO REGARD FOR TASTE OR QUALITY, THAT ATTEMPTS TO DOCUMENT THE INNUMERABLE WAYS THAT PEOPLE HAVE DEPICTED AND DEFINED—SLANDERED, CELEBRATED, OBFUSCATED, HYPERBOLIZED, VENTRILOQUIZED, PHOTOGRAPHED, SURVEYED, AND/OR EXHUMED—THAT VAST, VEXED, NEFARIOUS CONSTRUCT KNOWN AS 'THE MIDDLE EAST'. [23]



The Bidoun Library, installation view of selected texts, 2013. Photo courtesy of the Bidoun Library, courtesy The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

For the Carnegie International, the temporary installation of the Bidoun Library was formed by three standalone shelves, which were positioned to form a triangular space at the back of the Hall of Sculpture. Seating was installed at the center so that visitors could select books and peruse these at leisure. In the context of the Carnegie complex, this installation presented a counter to the long-established Carnegie Library system, which has proliferated across the English-speaking world and, like most libraries that have professional librarians on staff, has functioned to endorse texts as authoritative. But the Bidoun Library provides a material critique of seemingly authoritative texts, which are usually presented entirely distinct from their authors. The Library collective seeks to question the belief that these are authentic representations of the Middle East and clearly show that the texts often say more about the writer.<sup>[24]</sup> Unlike Baumgarten's textual work above, this library represents various viewpoints in multiple languages to complicate an often-simplified cultural construct.

While the Bidoun Library was an interesting project to include in the 2013 exhibition, an overly cramped Hall of Sculpture with too many works in it detracted from each of the projects in the space. Other work shown in the room included self-playing instruments by Pedro Reyes, photography by Joel Sternfeld and paintings and sculpture by Nicole Eisenman. The musical piece was the most distracting to any potential reading experience. Furthermore, the furniture installed in the library appeared to be designed a few decades ago. Were these leftovers found in storage, or was this a careful curatorial selection? Were these choices dictated by the Library collective? The choices might have gone unremarked if presented in a white cube, but inside the Carnegie Museum's temple cella, the furniture seemed confusingly out of place.

Today, there is no trace of Walker's figures, the Bidoun Library or McCollum's *Lost Objects*, but Baumgarten's piece remains in situ perpetuating the belief that a written record is of greater value than an oral history or directed institutional critique. The colonial imposition continues to be privileged in this temple to Western antiquity, but it is in the institution's power to critically re-examine its place in promoting this narrative. A multitude of demands for innovative programming to engage new and diverse audiences quickly pushes the re-contextualization of a museum's history to the side. However, it is the very act of recognizing and re-presenting this narrative that will allow the institutions to welcome more members of their communities. Thirty years after the Baumgarten was first installed, curator Ingrid Schaffner has the opportunity to recognize and respond to it in a lasting and meaningful way. Will she do this, or will it fade into the background of the architecture so as to meet demands for a contemporary spectacle?

[1] Gillian Belnap, ed. *The Carnegie Museum of Art Collection Highlights*, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1995 and on the museum website. Accessed 19 May 2015. [2] *The Carnegie Museum of Art Collection Highlights* and on the museum website. [3] John Russell "Lothar Baumgarten's Discreet Provocations," *The New York Times*, 6 November 1988. Accessed 19 May 2015. [4] Ngugi Wa Thion'go, "The Language of African Literature," In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, B. Ashcroft et al. (1995): 290. [5] Jean Fisher "A Distant Laughter: The Poetics of Dislocation," in Braembussche, Antoon, et al (Eds.) *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective* (Springer Press, 2009), 158. [6] Quoted in Russell. [7] Cornelia Lauf, accessed 25 April 2015. [8] Russell. [9] Fisher, 161. [10] Fisher, 159. [11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 187–206. [12] Thomas Lawson, "Allan McCollum Interviewed by Thomas Lawson," pdf on artist's website 14–15, originally published in *Allan McCollum*, Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press (1996). [13] Lawson, 11. [14] Lawson, 13. [15] Lawson, 4. [16] Lawson, 13. [17] Roderick A. Ferguson, "A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History," *American Quarterly* 61.1 (2009): 186. [18] Ibid., 190–191 [19] Ibid., 188 [20] Hilton Als, "The Sugar Sphinx," *The New Yorker* 8 May 2014. Accessed 19 May 2015. [21] Madeleine Grynsztejn, *CI/99/00 V.O.I.* (1999): 115. [22] Adrian Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, (2003), 243. [23] CI13 Gallery guide [24] Denise Ryner, "Not a Collection of Cool Stuff – On the Bidoun Library," *Fuse Magazine*, 34–4 (Fall 2011) 14.

#ALLAN MCCOLLUM #ARCHITECTURE #ART #BIDOUN LIBRARY #CARNEGIE MUSEUM OF ART  
#CHEROKEE #CONTEMPORARY ART #INGRID SCHAFFNER #INSTALLATION ART  
#INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE #JIMMIE DURHAM #KARA WALKER #KRISTINA MIERINS #LOTHAR  
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